

Protective properties of magnetron-sputtered Ti coating on CoSb₃ thermoelectric material



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ABSTRACT

In this study, protective Ti coatings were deposited on the CoSb₃ substrate by DC magnetron sputtering to prevent the sublimation of Sb. The microstructure of Ti coating was observed by SEM and AFM. The thermal aging behaviors of coated CoSb₃ samples were investigated through accelerated aging at 650 °C for 24 h. The results indicated that Ti coatings were columnar crystals and body-centered cubic structure. The preferred orientation of Ti film was along the crystal plane of (002). The thickness of Ti film increased with the deposition time increasing. The weight loss decreased with the thickness of Ti coating increasing. Compared with the uncoated CoSb₃ material, the degradation of thermoelectric properties for coated CoSb₃ samples decreased slowly after accelerated thermal aging test.

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1. Introduction

Recently, thermoelectric (TE) material has attracted worldwide attention due to their potential applications in electronic cooling, waste heat recovery and special power generation [1–3]. The conversion efficiency of TE material is determined by the dimensionless figure of merit, $ZT = \alpha^2 \sigma T / \kappa$, where α is the Seebeck coefficient, σ is the electrical conductivity, T is the absolute temperature, and κ is the total thermal conductivity. The total thermal conductivity is composed of an electron part (κ_E) and a phonon part (κ_L). Skutterudite compounds have been reported to have high ZT value and regarded as one of the most promising TE materials operating at elevated temperature [4,5]. Great progresses have been achieved in the improvement of TE properties, and larger ZT up to 1.7 at 850 K was obtained in Ba₄La₄Yb₄Co₄Sb₁₂ triple-filled skutterudites [6–8]. However, CoSb₃ material is vulnerable to decompose and Sb atoms could sublime from CoSb₃-based skutterudites at high temperature, which would change the composition of TE materials, finally leading to the degradation of the TE performance. Furthermore, the sublimation products can diffuse or condense on the cold-side of the TE uncouples, resulting in the electrical short circuit of TE device. The thermal decomposition or sublimation is the major reason for the degradation of skutterudite materials working at high temperature [9,10]. Therefore, it is essential to develop a protective coating to suppress the

sublimation of Sb from CoSb₃-based skutterudites. So far, few studies about the coating for CoSb₃ material were reported. Cr-5Si thin layers onto CoSb₃ deposited by pulse magnetron sputtering was used to deter the degradation of skutterudite at elevated temperatures in air, but the thin layers lost the protection function at 600 °C [11]. Dong et al. fabricated the silica-based composite coatings on the surface of n-type Yb_{0.3}Co₄Sb₁₂ and p-type CeFe₃CoSb₁₂ skutterudites using hybrid silica sol as raw material [12,13]. However, the methods mentioned above are complex and the thickness of protective film is difficult to control. In brief, the aim of coating on skutterudites is to prevent the sublimation, or at least reduce it to an acceptably low level. As we know, besides a certain chemical inertness with Co or Sb element, the coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) is also an important factor for a suitable protective coating which should have the CTE match with CoSb₃ material. The CTE of CoSb₃ and Ti is $(0.92–1.05) \times 10^{-5} \text{ K}^{-1}$ and $(0.85–0.90) \times 10^{-5} \text{ K}^{-1}$ when temperature ranges from 100 °C to 600 °C, respectively [14]. Therefore, Ti film is possibly an appropriate protective coating for CoSb₃ material.

In this study, a protective Ti coating was conveniently deposited on the CoSb₃ substrate by magnetron sputtering to prevent the sublimation of Sb. The microstructure and growth feature of Ti film were observed by SEM and AFM. As the CoSb₃-based generator generally works at about 500 °C, the accelerated thermal aging tests at 650 °C for 24 h were carried out. The effect of suppressing sublimation Sb of Ti film was evaluated by measuring the TE properties after accelerated thermal aging test. Related thermal aging behavior was attentively discussed. The results are expected to be beneficial to the development of CoSb₃-based TE generator.

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Table 1
Deposition conditions of Ti layer on CoSb₃ substrate prepared by magnetron sputtering.

Ti coating	Ar pressure (Pa)	Current (A)	Voltage (V)	Time (min)	Temperature (°C)	Thickness (μm)
Coating 1	2.5×10^{-3}	0.5	310	15	200	2
Coating 2	2.5×10^{-3}	0.5	310	30	200	7
Coating 3	2.5×10^{-3}	0.5	310	45	200	10

2. Experimental procedure

The substrate material, CoSb₃ skutterudite material, was synthesized by melting, quenching, annealing process. Stoichiometric quantities of the constituent pure elements Co (99.97%, powder) and Sb (99.99%, powder) were weighed according to the mole ration, loaded in a quartz tube with carbon depositing on the inner wall, and sealed under a pressure of 0.1 Pa. The samples were melted at 1050 °C for 16 h and then was quenched in saltwater. The obtained solid product was ground into fine powder and then sintered into a dense solid by hot-pressing sintering (HPS) at 560 °C for 30 min in a graphite die. The specimens with 10 mm in diameter and 2 mm in thickness were produced by HPS. All the densities of CoSb₃ samples measured were higher than 98%. The CoSb₃ substrates were first ultrasonically cleaned in acetone for 10 min, and then dried by blowing hot air before being place in the deposition chamber.

Pulsed magnetron sputtering technique was used to deposit Ti thin films. A titanium target (purity better than 99.9%, Beijing Haipu Technology Co., Ltd.) of 74 mm diameter and 3 mm thickness was used to deposit protective films on CoSb₃ substrate by means of a specially designed DC magnetron sputtering system. During sputtering, the target-to-substrate distance was kept constant at 70 mm. The substrate temperature was kept constant at 200 °C. The flow rate of the argon (99.99% purity) was 50 standard cubic centimeter per minute (sccm). Pre-sputtering of the Ti target was performed for 3 min before each deposition. The deposition conditions and pulse parameters of magnetron sputtering in the present investigation are given in Table 1. By adjusting the sputtering time, the thickness of Ti film was controlled. The structural properties of Ti films were characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD, Rigaku, Rint-2000). The surfaces morphology of Ti thin films on the CoSb₃ substrates was observed by field emission SEM (JEOL, JSM-6700F) and atomic force microscopy (AFM, SPA-300HV). The surface area and weight of the CoSb₃ samples were measured before each test. The weight loss divided by exposed surface area provided the weight loss per area. The CoSb₃ samples with Ti coating were sealed in quartz tubes and heated at a rate of 220 °C/h in the furnace to the aging temperature (650 °C). After keeping at the aging temperature for 24 h, the samples were cooled to room temperature in furnace naturally. The mass changes were calculated by the difference after and before the thermal duration tests from an electronic balance with an accuracy of 0.1 mg. In the measurement of weight loss, the CoSb₃ samples were 8 mm × 8 mm × 4 mm and all surfaces of CoSb₃ samples were deposited by Ti films. The measurements of Seebeck coefficient and electrical conductivity were carried out by the standard four-probe method (ULVAC-RIKO, ZEM-2) in a flowing Ar atmosphere. The rectangular CoSb₃ samples with Ti films (10 mm × 3 mm × 2 mm) were prepared by magnetron sputtering under the same conditions. Actually, the hot sides of thermoelectric elements usually need to be deposited by coating, just as shown in Fig. 1(a). The direction of thermal fluid and current flow is parallel with that of coating. Therefore, the electrical conductivity and Seebeck coefficient of CoSb₃ samples with Ti coating deposited on four side faces were measured, as shown in Fig. 1(b). Based on the same model displayed in Fig. 1(a), disk-type CoSb₃ specimens with the dimensions of 10 mm (diameter) and 1 mm (thickness) were prepared for thermal conductivity. There is no coating on the

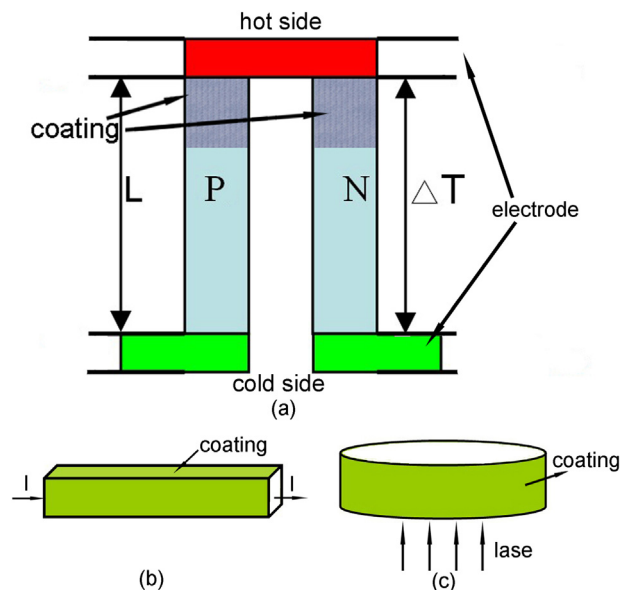


Fig. 1. (a) Schematic diagram of TE device; (b) schematic diagram of electrical conductivity of CoSb₃ with Ti coating; (c) schematic diagram of thermal conductivity of CoSb₃ with Ti coating.

upper surface and lower surface of samples, as shown in Fig. 1(c). Thermal conductivity was measured by a laser flash method (NET-ZSCH, LFA427) in vacuum. All measurements were performed in a temperature range of 27–550 °C.

3. Results and discussion

Fig. 2 shows the X-ray diffraction patterns of Ti coating on CoSb₃ substrate deposited by different time. Compared with the peaks of uncoated CoSb₃ samples, the peak of Ti (0 0 2) at $2\theta = 38.3^\circ$ was observed in the XRD patterns of coated CoSb₃ samples. As the Ti film deposited by magnetron sputtering was very thin, the peaks of CoSb₃ substrate also existed. In addition, with the time of

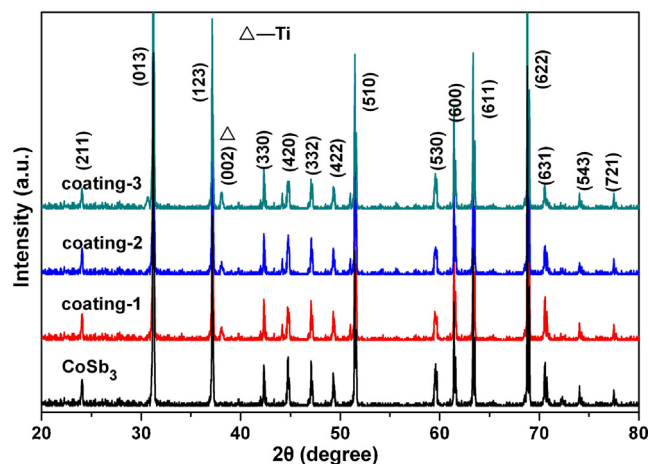


Fig. 2. XRD patterns of the as-deposited Ti films on CoSb₃ substrate.

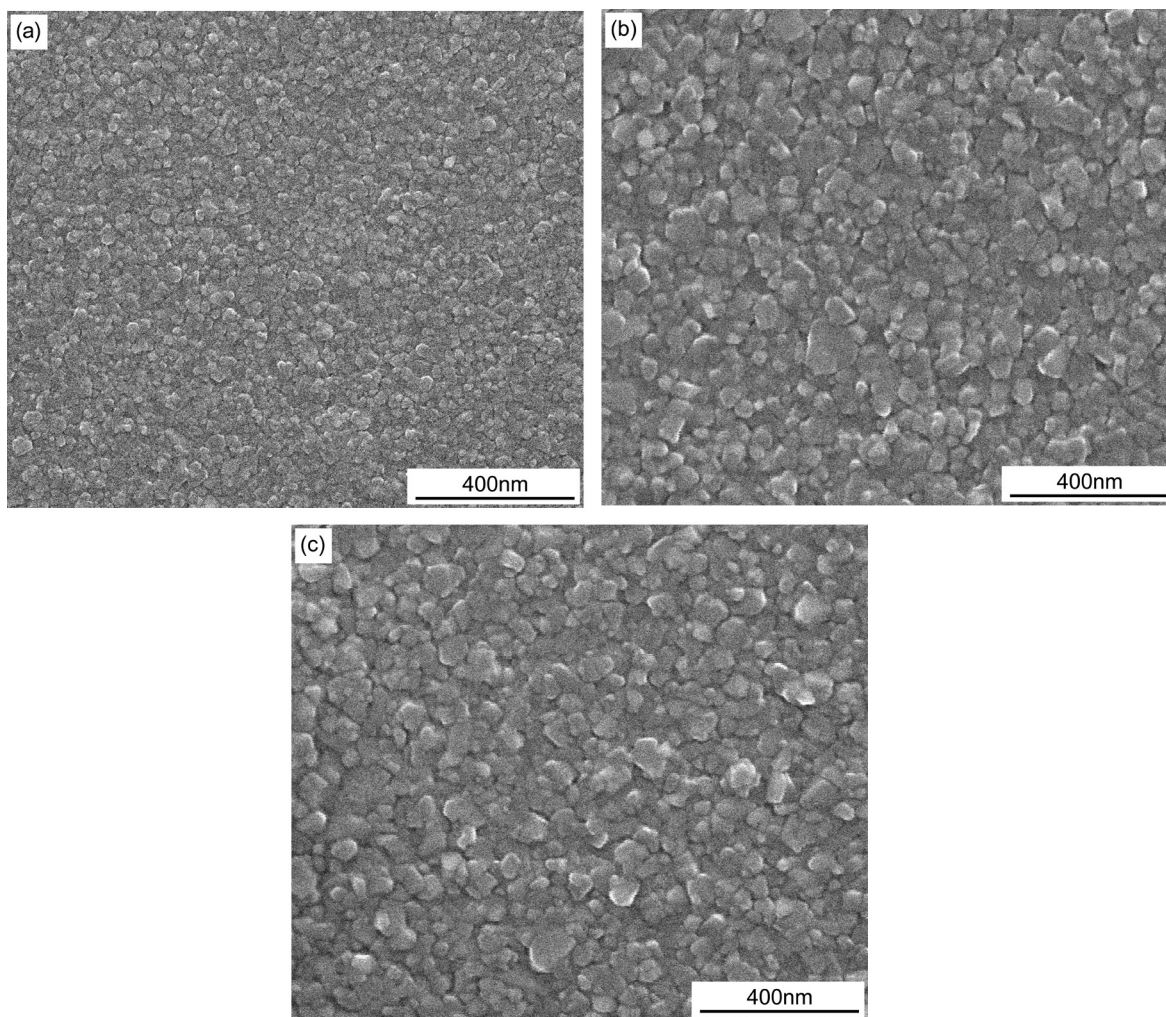


Fig. 3. Surface morphology of Ti film on CoSb₃ substrate after different deposition time using magnetron sputtering, (a) 15 min; (b) 30 min; (c) 45 min.

magnetron sputtering increasing, the intensity of peak of Ti increased which indicated the Ti thin film grew and the thickness increased. Fig. 3 shows the surface morphology of the Ti film on CoSb₃ substrate after different deposition time. It can be seen that no cracks, porosity or other defects existed on the Ti films. With the deposition time increasing, the grain size of Ti film increased. The average grain size of Ti film after 15 min was 30 nm, just as shown in Fig. 3(c). Moreover, the Ti thin film deposited grew in the mode of island growth. The formation of Ti thin film on the CoSb₃ substrate was the results of the deposition of sputtered atoms from the target on the CoSb₃ surface. Argon gas is ionized with the plasma and the argon ions are accelerated into the Ti target surface. Some of the Ti atoms are sputtered off of the target. As the temperature of substrate was relatively low, the sputtered Ti atoms were condensed on the CoSb₃ substrate. After the diffusion and migration of atoms, the stable crystal nucleuses formed and grew. Then the crystal nucleuses grew into islands. With the deposition time increasing, the islands became interconnected and the continuous Ti film formed on the substrate. The deposition rate was very slow in the initial stage due to the nucleation and growth of Ti thin film. With the deposition time increasing, the deposition rate increased and gradually became stabilized. Just as shown in Fig. 3, the Ti film became more smooth and denser with the deposition time increasing. The surface morphology of Ti film was also studied by AFM, as shown in Fig. 4. It also can be observed that the deposition of Ti film was the three-dimensional island growth. Several groups reported

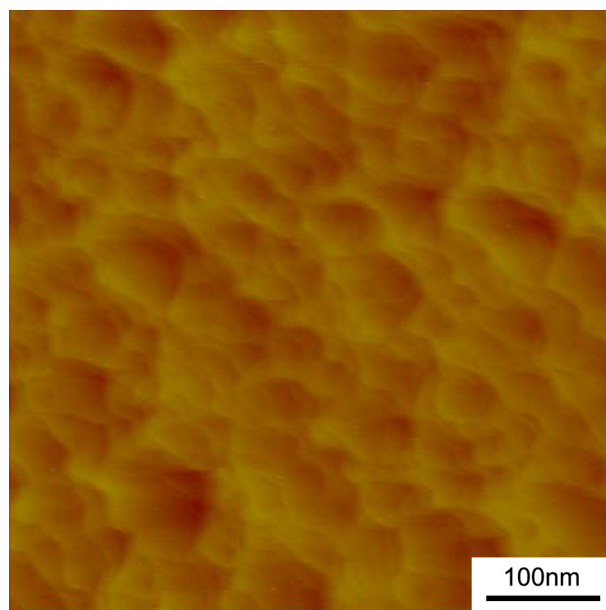


Fig. 4. AFM image of Ti film on CoSb₃ substrate after deposition of 45 min.

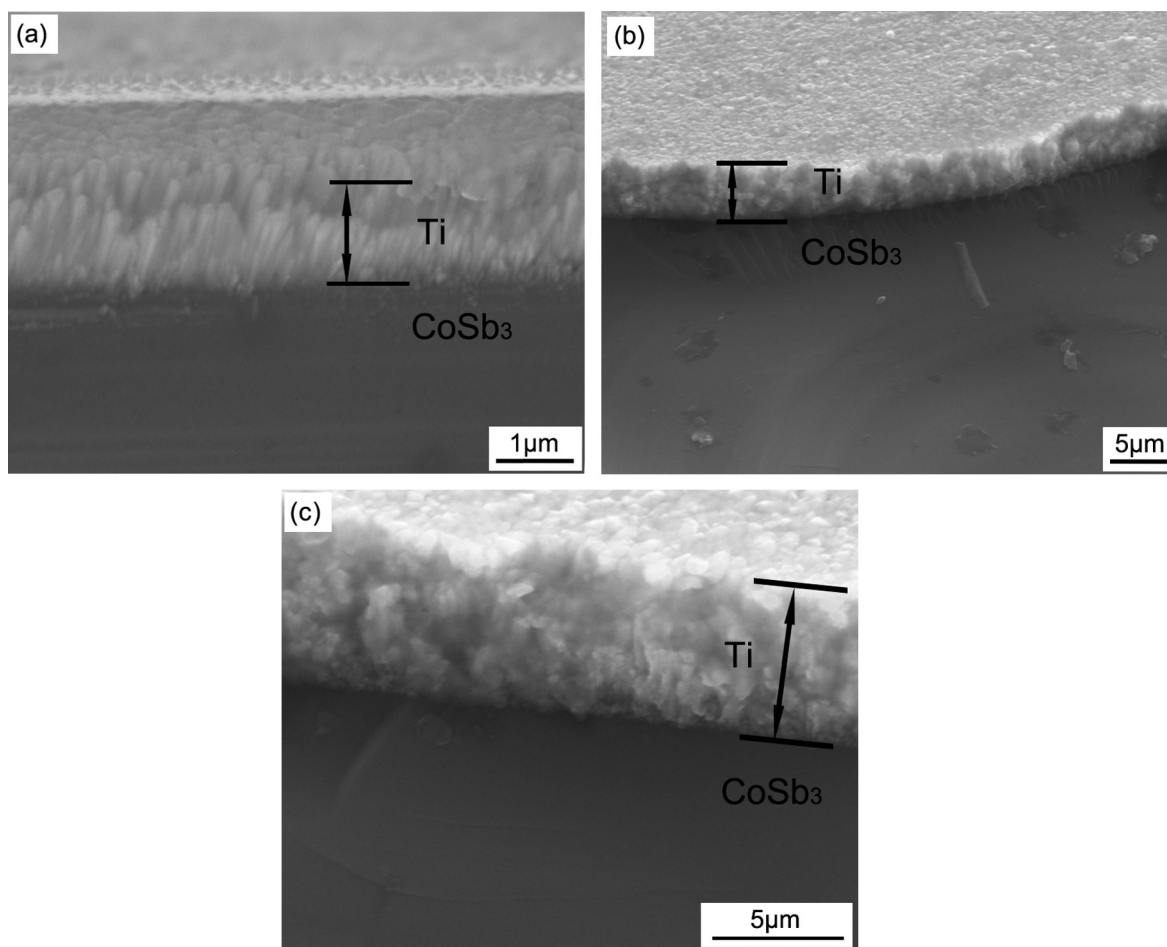


Fig. 5. (a) Fractal morphology of Ti film on CoSb₃ substrate after deposition of 15 min; (b) fractal morphology of Ti film after deposition of 30 min; (c) enlarged morphology of (b).

the lattice mismatch between film and substrate might affect the formation of surface islands [15,16], which was accounted for using the thermal dynamic and kinetic model [17,18]. Due to the low lattice mismatch between Ti and CoSb₃ [19], island growth of Ti film was distinct relatively. Fig. 5 shows the fractal morphology of the Ti film on CoSb₃ substrate deposited by different time using magnetron sputtering. It can be observed that the Ti film was a columnar grain structure and the thickness of Ti film was 1.2 μm after the deposition of 15 min. With the deposition time increasing, the thickness of Ti film increased to 5.8 μm after the deposition of 30 min. According to the zone model, the microstructure of sputter-deposited film was closely related to the T_s/T_m , where T_s is the substrate temperature and T_m is the melting point of film [20]. Based on the T_s/T_m , the structure zone could be divided into four regimes, in which the microstructure of sputtered film is critically affected by shadowing, surface diffusion and bulk diffusion with the T_s/T_m increasing. In this study the T_s/T_m for Ti film grown at 200 °C was about 0.24, which corresponds to the zone where surface and self-diffusion become active. As the surface diffusion of condensed atoms is high and the bulk diffusion is not sufficient, the film would grow in the form of columnar grains, which was also consistent with previous reports about the microstructure of sputter-deposited films [21,22].

As the hot sides of skutterudite-based TE materials generally work at about 500 °C, the accelerated thermal aging test of coated CoSb₃ samples was carried out at 650 °C for 24 h in this study. For comparison, the uncoated CoSb₃ sample was also tested through accelerated thermal aging test. Fig. 6 shows the SEM images of

uncoated and coated CoSb₃ samples after accelerated thermal aging test. It can be seen that the surface of CoSb₃ became degraded seriously and some polyhedron crystallites (antimony) were precipitated in the grain boundary, just as shown in Fig. 6(a). The antimony in CoSb₃ sample sublimed according to the following equation [14]:



However, no crack was found at the region of Ti/CoSb₃ interface in the coated CoSb₃ sample after accelerated thermal aging test, which indicated that the bonding of Ti coating with CoSb₃ substrate was well after accelerated thermal aging test, just as shown in Fig. 6(b). In addition, it is worth mentioning that some intermetallic phases such as Ti–Sb, Co–Ti or Ti–Co–Sb compounds maybe form at the region of Ti/CoSb₃ interface due to the interdiffusion during the thermal aging. If the cracks appear at the region of intermetallic phases due to the thermal stress after thermal aging test, the cracks will provide short-circuit channels of sublimation of Sb. In view of evaluating the protective effect of Ti coating, the intermetallic phases also play an important role in evaluating the lifetime of Ti coating on CoSb₃ materials. These experimental and theoretical studies are undergoing now and will be reported in future.

To evaluate the effects of Ti coating on suppressing the sublimation of Sb, the weight loss and TE properties of coated CoSb₃ samples after accelerated thermal aging test were measured. Fig. 7 shows the weight loss per unit area of coated CoSb₃ samples after accelerated thermal aging test. It can be seen that the weight loss

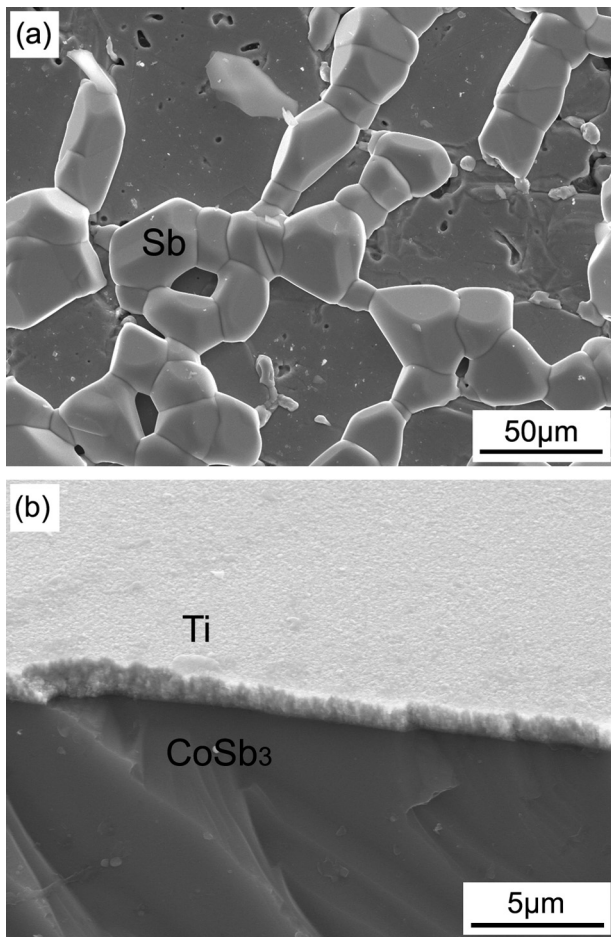


Fig. 6. (a) SEM image of uncoated CoSb₃ sample after accelerated thermal aging test; (b) SEM image of Ti film on CoSb₃ substrate after accelerated thermal aging test.

per unit area of coated CoSb₃ samples was much lower than that of uncoated CoSb₃ samples after accelerated thermal aging test, indicating the Ti coating could effectively suppress the sublimation of Sb in CoSb₃ materials. The weight loss per unit area of coated CoSb₃ samples with coating-1 was 2.3×10^{-2} kg/m² after accelerated thermal aging test. Moreover, protective effect of thicker Ti

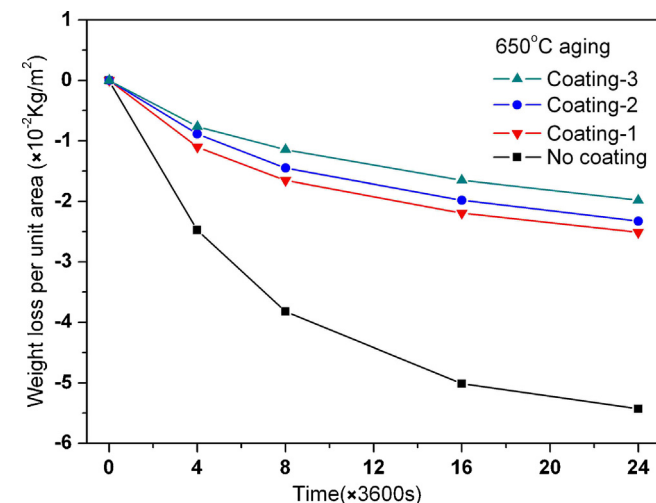


Fig. 7. The weight loss per unit area of coated CoSb₃ after accelerated thermal aging test.

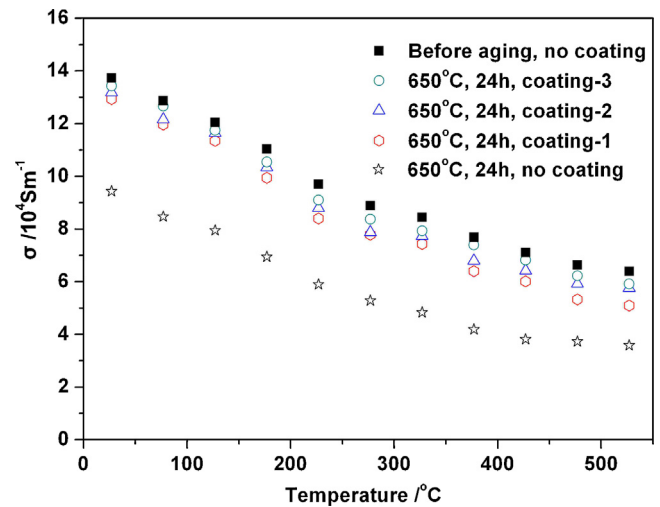


Fig. 8. The electrical conductivity of coated CoSb₃ after accelerated thermal aging test.

coating was better. The weight loss per unit area of coated CoSb₃ samples with coating-3 was 40% lower than that of coated CoSb₃ samples with coating-1 after accelerated thermal aging test.

Fig. 8 shows the electrical conductivity (σ) of coated CoSb₃ samples after accelerated thermal aging test. Compared with the σ of uncoated CoSb₃ before accelerated thermal aging test, the σ of uncoated CoSb₃ after accelerated thermal aging test decreased by about 40%. However, the σ of coated CoSb₃ samples decreased a little bit compared with the σ of uncoated CoSb₃ before accelerated thermal aging test, except for an obvious decrease at high temperature region. The results indicated the Ti coating on CoSb₃ substrate could significantly hinder the sublimation of Sb and no other negative effects on the σ of CoSb₃. In addition, the thicker Ti coating on CoSb₃ substrate had the better protective effect on hindering the sublimation of Sb. Similar variation was also found in the results of Seebeck coefficient (α) of CoSb₃ with Ti coating after accelerated thermal aging test, just as shown in **Fig. 9**. Compared with the α of uncoated CoSb₃ before accelerated thermal aging test, the α of uncoated CoSb₃ after accelerated thermal aging test decreased by about 30%. Similarly, the α of coated CoSb₃ decreased a little bit compared with the α of uncoated CoSb₃ before accelerated thermal aging test. **Fig. 10** is the thermal conductivity (κ) of coated CoSb₃ samples after accelerated thermal aging test. It can be seen that after accelerated thermal aging test, the κ of uncoated CoSb₃

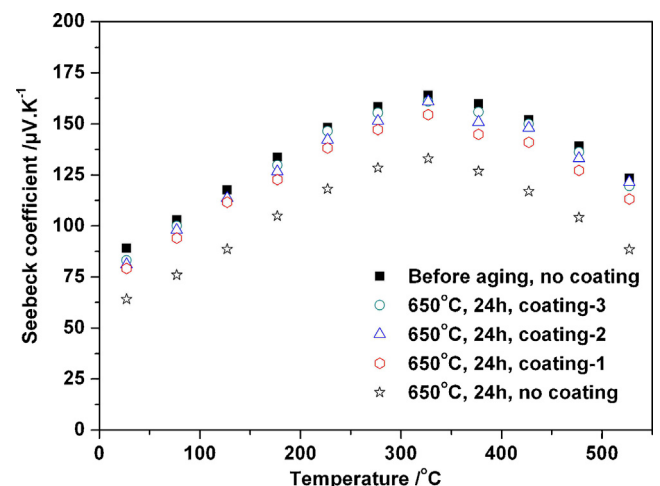


Fig. 9. Seebeck coefficients of coated CoSb₃ after accelerated thermal aging test.

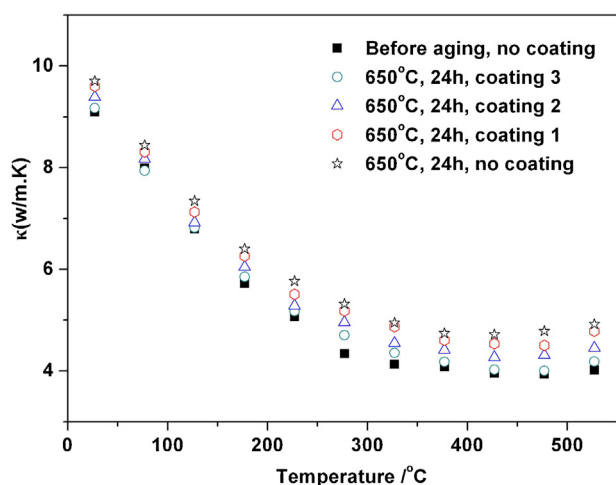


Fig. 10. The thermal conductivity of coated CoSb₃ after accelerated thermal aging test.

increased due to the higher κ of CoSb₂ resulting from the sublimation of Sb. However, the κ of coated CoSb₃ samples increased slowly compared with the κ of uncoated CoSb₃ samples because the sublimation of Sb was inhibited effectively. As the κ was measured according to the schematic diagram in Fig. 1 and there was no coating on the upper and lower surfaces, the direction of thermal fluid was parallel with that of coating. Therefore, the Ti coating may also contribute to the increased κ compared with the κ of uncoated CoSb₃ samples.

The conversion efficiency of TE materials depends on the maximum dimensionless figure of merit (ZT). From the measured electrical and thermal transport properties, the dimensionless figure of merit of coated CoSb₃ samples is calculated and shown in Fig. 11. Compared with the ZT value of uncoated CoSb₃ before accelerated thermal aging test, the ZT value of uncoated CoSb₃ decreased obviously after accelerated thermal aging test. However, the ZT value of coated CoSb₃ samples decreased unclearly after accelerated thermal aging test because the sublimation of Sb was suppressed due to the Ti coating. For the coated CoSb₃ samples with coating-3, the maximum ZT value decreased from 0.26 to 0.22 at 327 °C after accelerated thermal aging test.

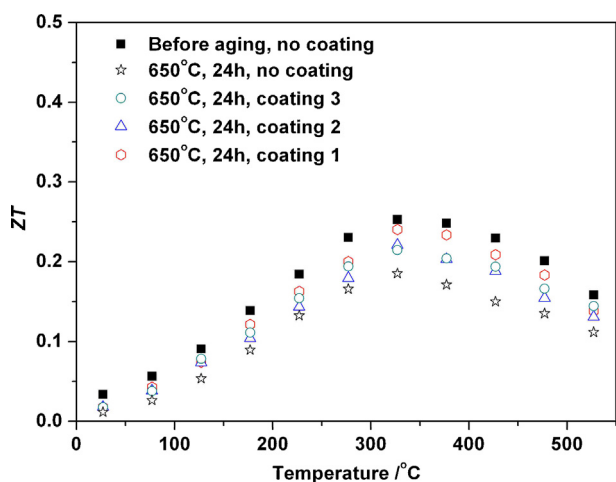


Fig. 11. The dimensionless figure of merit of coated CoSb₃ after accelerated thermal aging test.

4. Conclusions

Protective Ti coating was deposited on the CoSb₃ substrate by DC magnetron sputtering to prevent the sublimation of Sb. The preferred orientation of Ti film was along the crystal plane of (002). No cracks, porosity or other defects exist on the Ti films and the Ti film grew in the mode of island growth. The thickness of Ti film increased with the deposition time increasing. The coated CoSb₃ sample with thicker Ti film had lower weight loss per unit area after accelerated thermal aging test. Compared with the uncoated CoSb₃ material, the degradation of TE properties of coated CoSb₃ decreased slowly after accelerated thermal aging test.

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